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Amazon Warriors in Classical Greek Art: Exploring Patriarchal Foundations in Ancient Greece

By: Clara Jeanne Reed

Abstract: This paper explores the iconographic representation of Amazons, a race of women warriors, in classical Greek art from the fifth century BCE through the lens of gender theory. Studying Amazonian representation provides insightful opportunities into how gender was regarded in ancient Greece, including how Ancient Greek women had little to no political voice and were controlled by men at virtually every stage of their lives. This was driven by biological notions of sex, whereas today, patriarchal oppression has evolved into a desire to overcome the “other.”ⁱ This paper discusses the mysterious history of the Amazons to establish a foundation for the narratives they tell in art, the most prevalent being a trope of the Amazon as wounded, defeated, and submissive. By focusing on a singular case study of the *Marble Statue of a Wounded Amazon* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the central discussion will expand to include broader themes of the male gaze, female representation, and gender roles that became archetypes for modern society.

Keywords: *Amazon warriors, male gaze, female representations, gender roles, classical Greek art*

Epic literature of the Mediterranean contains heroic tales of suffering, endurance, and fantastical stories of mythic adventure. For the most part, these stories revolve around a male hero and his panhellenic quests. There is Athena, goddess of wisdom and strategy whom Odysseus wins favor with; there is Briseis, concubine and trophy of Achilles; and certainly, the unadulterated and idealized wife Penelope.ⁱⁱ There are other examples of women whose roles in these narratives are pivotal, but their names are not memorable, and their stories are brief (if even mentioned). A case example is Penthesilea, an Amazon queen and warrior who comes to the aid of King Priam in the Trojan War and dies in battle at the hand of Achilles.ⁱⁱⁱ Her story is told in *Aethiopis*, a lost Epic Cycle that has become categorized as Homeric tradition.^{iv} In contemporary retellings, Penthesilea is often twisted and reframed to be overtly sexual and emotional, implying that her immense passion for Achilles triggered her own demise on the battlefield.^v Penthesilea's narrative is just one story that allows a glimpse into the patriarchal representations of female gender roles both in ancient literature and ancient Greek culture as a whole. However, it is important to note that contemporary views and morals often cloud judgment when thinking about the past. Since we are so far removed chronologically speaking from this period, there is no way to know with certainty how the Greeks regarded Amazons, but it is clear that male citizens were the only individuals with an actual voice, resting comfortably at the top of the social hierarchy. While today we might view ancient Greek representations of women as misogynistic, this cannot be used as a blanket term to describe ancient Greek culture. However, we can use examples from material culture to think about what requirements a woman needed to fulfill to be considered "good" or "bad" in ancient Greek society.

Marble Statue of a Wounded Amazon, on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met), showcases the commonly depicted narrative of tragedy and vulnerability, a woman dying at

the hands of a man. Amazon iconography in Greek art was compelling to ancient viewers, as Amazonian stories frequently decorated the metopes of temples and multitudes of statues, like those at The Temple of Nike, the Parthenon, and the Temple at Ephesus, most often shown in processes of dying or defeat. It was a strategic use of iconography as propaganda, to display Greek power over otherness on the most worshiped and revered places. This trope was exhibited in both Penthesilea's story and in the statue at the Met; it was an obvious portrayal of victory, notions of conquering, and power over a group deemed inferior by the majority. Otherness, in the most straightforward sense, is the quality of being different from those who hold the majority of power. Amazons were considered "other" because they were foreign female warriors that posed a threat to the traditional role women held in Greek society, one that was silent and kept inside the home. By exploring the relationship of the male gaze to the female subject in artistic production, this discussion lends itself to a more comprehensive understanding of otherness, and how the patriarchy shaped women in ancient Greek society through the story of the Amazons.

Marble Statue of a Wounded Amazon is a Roman copy from the 1st - 2nd centuries C.E. that was based on a Greek bronze original from the 5th century B.C.E (Fig. 1).^{vi} Originally, it most likely stood in the great temple of Artemis at Ephesus, located on the coast of Asia Minor.^{vii} This temple is interesting in the context of women's representation in ancient Greek culture, as its construction was unusual in that it involved and credited many women in the public building projects for the temple, with their names inscribed alongside their husbands throughout the ancient city.^{viii} It is a safe assumption that this temple was once the original statue's home given its location and context. The city itself has fabled associations with the Cult of Artemis, with historical accounts attributing the temple to the Amazons for worship of Artemis of Ephesus (one of their matron goddesses).^{ix} Scholar Florence Mary Bennett said, "there was a close connection between

the Amazons and Ephesian Artemis, a type of mother showing Cretan-Lycian affiliations,” probably because of her values surrounding maidenhood and hunting.^x According to accounts from Pliny the Elder, the statue was most likely produced as a result of a 5th-century B.C.E. contest between the sculptors Phidias, Polykleitos, and Kresilas to have their statue of an Amazon displayed in the temple.^{xi} It is important to remember that all that survives is a Roman copy of this wounded Amazon. Since we only have a copy, it is nearly impossible to confidently determine the statue’s provenance, as we have to rely primarily on written accounts describing the statue’s origin and life cycle (this remains the case for most early classical and high classical sculptures). However, thanks to historians and naturalists like Pliny the Elder and Pausanias, we are able to grasp some understanding of this work’s original function and history.

The popularity of Amazonian iconography can be attributed to two purposes. The first, as a symbol for the Greeks victory over Persia, in an attempt to feminize their opponents and make them appear weaker.^{xii} The second, as a more abstract representation of creating order out of chaos, “civilization out of barbarism.”^{xiii} The word “amazon,” according to John Porter, has colloquially developed into, “a sexist term for any woman who is particularly muscular, athletic, powerful, assertive, or so forth,” or in other words, any woman who breaks out of the stereotypical gender roles established by men.^{xiv} There is limited history on Amazon culture but through Homeric tale, we know that they historically were active in central Anatolia, as Priam recounts his travels to Phrygia (located in Western Anatolia) to come to the aid of the Phrygians in a clash with the Amazons.

“Oh son of Atreus, blessed child of fortune and favor,
 many are these beneath your sway, these sons of the Achaians.
 Once before this time I visited Phrygia of the Vineyards.
 There I looked on the Phrygian men with their swarming horses,
 so many of them, the people of Otreus and godlike Mygdon,

whose camp was spread at the time along the banks of Sangarios:
 And I myself, a helper in war, was marshaled among them
 on that day when the Amazon women came, men's equals."
 (*Iliad*, Homer 3.182-189, R. Lattimore Tr.)

This is one of the only times the Amazons are mentioned by Homer, where we are given an idea of provenance, but little is known about their backstory or lifestyle.^{xv} Priam's description of them is particularly fascinating, as he does not regard them as anything but men's equals. But their persona is condensed into fighters, opponents to the Greeks that just show up and disappear. What is clear, is that the defining role they occupy is that of an outsider. As a nomadic community of women warriors, they represent the opposite values of Greek society, and their representation in Greek art reflected what was probably a constructed inverse perspective stemming from Greeks classifying anything that did not conform to their culture as the "other." In fact, the etymology of the word "amazon" was non-Greek and used to designate an alien Other, and the word thus carried heavy burdens of sexism and xenophobia into present day.^{xvi}

Ancient Greece was made up of individual city states, or *polis*, although they did not function together as one harmonious identity, except in times of war, where their disparate identities were connected together as one unit working towards a common goal. Coming back to Homer, we see an example of this in his account of the Trojan War, when all the kings of Greece signed a document promising to come to Menelaus's (the husband of Helen of Sparta) aid should something ever happen to his wife. When she disappeared with the prince of Troy, the sons of Atreus called on the kings of Greece to hold them to their oath and declare war on Troy. War against any foreign entity, including the Amazons, therefore became a popular subject in art to push agendas of unity and power over anything that threatened the stability of society. There was an obvious bias against women and non-Greeks in ancient Greek culture, often exhibited through

iconographic themes of opposition and war. This is especially prevalent in the Parthenon metope's relief sculptures. Each side of the Parthenon houses a different narrative of the Greeks obtaining victory: the east side presents the battle between the gods and giants, the west side the battle between the Greeks and the Amazons (which will be discussed more in depth later on in this paper), the north side the battle between the Greeks and the Trojans, and the south side the battle between the Lapiths and the centaurs.^{xvii} These four conflicts with the “monstrous — female — non-greek — and bestial,” establish Greek men as the closest to the divine, and superior in the hierarchy of society.^{xviii} It is especially telling that women (although admittedly a specific type of woman) are included in this grouping, as it reveals a definite patriarchal bias that is continually reinforced in Amazonian representations that are tragic, vulnerable, and defeated. The choice to portray only this specific chapter of the story in material culture highlights how these warrior women were regarded in the past, as something to be conquered.

Upon first glance at this statue, you would not assume this Amazon is wounded and in the process of dying. She rests rather gracefully upon a column, supporting her weight with her left elbow while her right arm drapes elegantly across her head. Her face shows little to no emotion, exhibiting no signs of pain or exhaustion, which is a common characteristic among classical sculpture of this period. Without reading the wall text for this piece or examining her wound closely, from a distance she could appear to be like any other Hellenic statue of a goddess, like Aphrodite, with the fabric of her clothing draped rather carelessly to reveal both breasts; there is no concern for modesty. She could appear to be just another statue of Aphrodite, seductively revealing herself to the audience as she gazes longingly into the distance. What distinguishes this sculpture from other depictions of women is her broad and muscular build, which strays away from the more typical depictions of women during 450-425 B.C.E. as slight, delicate, and soft.

She is not “mannish” by any means, but she is certainly in prime physical shape, with a muscular build like that of an athlete. In reference to Amazons’ physicality, scholar Renate Rolle wrote:

“Because their physical training was so varied, the physique of these fighting women would in no way have resembled ‘mannish’ women sometimes produced nowadays by intensive training for one particular competitive sport. We should presumably imagine them as being muscular, but not heavy, as stamina and agility are adversely affected by weight. Their diet of mainly meat and their physical dexterity would probably ensure that they resembled rather the present-day type of all-around athlete and long-distance runner.”^{xix}

Her sculpted physique provides an impression of strength that contrasts with her more feminine and delicate pose, which creates a complex foil to the spear-throwing, typically large, male warrior.

Adorning her body is a chiton, a form of tunic, belted at the waist and fastened over one shoulder with the fabric loosely slipping off her chest and revealing both breasts.^{xx} She does not wear a peplos (another garment that was longer and covered more of the body), which suggests her youth, as peploses were traditionally worn by older women.^{xxi} The chiton is also short in length, revealing her elongated legs and allowing for easier movement on the battlefield.^{xxii} Her feet are in a position of mid-walk, suggesting the potential for movement, as if she just stopped for a brief moment to rest. The use of *contrapposto* in this statue, a weight rendering technique often used in classical sculpture, further supports a Polykleitan authorship as the Amazon’s resting pose closely mimics that of the *Doryphoros* by Polykleitos, as she “rests her weight on the right leg, but changes the scheme completely by eliminating the *contrapposto* pattern, or rather, by shifting her balance only up to the waist while her shoulders remain virtually level.”^{xxiii} If the statue actually was made by Polykleitos and inspired by the *Doryphoros* (which would date it to at least around 440-430 B.C.E.), there is an important comparison to be made between the sculptures and the rendering of gender within them.

The *Doryphoros* is the canonical culmination of symmetria sculpture in the classical period of ancient Greece.^{xxiv} It is generally accepted that the statue represents Achilles, the great hero of the Greeks, most known from Homer's *Iliad*.^{xxv} He at one point held a spear in his right hand, evidenced by the ninety degree angle the arm rests at, and the flexed bicep muscle that implies he is holding on to something. Like the *Marble Statue of a Wounded Amazon*, his contrapposto also ends at his hips and his shoulders remain level (Fig. 2). To employ the same techniques used in the *Doryphoros* to this statue of an unnamed woman, gives her a sense of honor and respect, despite her obvious defeat. It is not uncommon in classical Greek iconography to see Achilles related in some way to the Amazons, given the myth surrounding him and Penthesilea, therefore this relation first proposed by scholar Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway does not seem too much of a reach.^{xxvi} Let us look at the Attic black-figure amphora attributed to Exekias from the 6th century B.C.E that portrays the moment Achilles slays Penthesilea (Fig. 3). Achilles holds an active stance above the obviously weakened Penthesilea as he thrusts his spear into her throat. She valiantly fights back with her spear but in vain as you see blood spraying from the wound in the form of a geyser marking Achilles with guilt in a thanato-erotic drama. The pose held by the two characters is blatantly suggestive of one individual being dominant, and one being submissive, in this case male and female respectively. This is another example of Amazon iconography being used to represent male power and dominance over the female body.

The artist is playing with a delicate balance of gender representations within the sculpture at the Met. There is an attempt to exhibit more masculine qualities that define her as a warrior; her broad shoulders, muscular biceps, and obvious battle scar show she is not passive or quiet, but a fighter. Simultaneously, the choice to openly expose both breasts could mean two things: the artist is blatantly over-sexualizing her (which we saw Kleist do to Penthesilea), or the artist wanted

to make sure their audience knew she was a woman. It is worth mentioning at this point the disparity in dress and age between genders when it comes to classical sculpture. Ada Cohen wrote that while, “male divinities such as Hermes and Dionysus may be shown as newborns, babies, or children, female divinities such as Athena and Aphrodite seem to begin life as an adult, fully grown.”^{xxvii} Women are primarily presented at the peak of their youth and sexual attraction, because women’s worth was, and is, based on the male gaze. It was a calculated decision to portray the Amazon as a worthy opponent, but not worthy *enough*. By comparing her to the *Doryphoros* and giving her stereotypically masculine qualities like muscles, the artist is attempting to emphasize that she is not like any other woman, but she is still not a man, and therefore unable to overpower the Greeks, which results in her fleeing from battle, weaponless and wounded.

The most important aspect of this sculpture in relation to our discussion is her fatal wound (Fig. 4). The wound rests underneath her right breast, represented in the stone as a small gash carved into the marble that spills white droplets of blood down her ribcage. The wound is quiet, subtle in its execution, and almost unnoticeable. Nevertheless, the gash is there to symbolize defeat, subjugation, and the imminent presence of death. She is weaponless, alone, and injured, becoming a reminder of our universal mortality. She represents an undeniably patriarchal perception in Ancient Greece, one that was so deep-rooted in society that even women’s view of their own worth was based on how men viewed them.

While this statue continues a pattern of Amazons repeatedly being portrayed as wounded or fallen in battle, I recognize that seeing smoke and immediately assuming fire (in this case misogyny) via one example, is presumptuous. This is especially true considering Amazons were often referred to (albeit with some shock value) as equivalent to men and worthy opponents to male warriors. In the *Iliad*, Homer quite literally (via King Priam) refers to the Amazon women

as “men’s equals.”^{xxviii} It is no coincidence then that they preferred to portray these warrior women at their most vulnerable, in various states of defeat. This artistic choice helped emphasize the victory of the Greeks, while also soothing their egos. Perhaps the most well-known example of this trope, is represented in temple decoration, as seen on the Parthenon and the Temple of Nike.

The west side metopes depicting the battle between the Greeks and the Amazons from the Parthenon in Athens support this claim. The entire premise of the Parthenon was to exhibit *symmetria* (perfect and harmonious design) that exemplified Greek victory and superiority. The content of the pediments, metopes, frieze, and other sculpture surrounding the Parthenon was meticulously chosen to present the idealized *polis* (city state) of Athenian society.^{xxix} John R. Porter wrote, “the metopes presented a series of straightforward oppositions between good and evil, order and chaos, culture and savagery, with the Amazons falling on the negative side of that balance sheet,” an obvious example of ancient Greek culture’s antagonism towards women.^{xxx} There are 92 metopes encircling the Parthenon, all carved in high relief by Pheidias, all originally polychromatic, and most of them in poor condition as a result of religious intolerance, iconoclasm, and overall degradation (Fig. 5).^{xxxi} While the west metopes are almost indiscernible, it has been widely accepted among scholars that the subject matter depicts the Amazonomachy, given its iconographic and compositional similarities to attic-vase paintings, and the subject’s frequency on other temples such as The Temple of Athena Nike (also on the Acropolis of Athens) and The Temple of Apollo at Bassae (Figs. 10-11).^{xxxii} The west side also looks out towards the Areopagus, where mythology tells us Theseus and his fellow Athenians defeated the Amazons after an attempted invasion. This invasion was rather justifiable, as it came in retaliation to Theseus kidnapping the Amazon queen, Antiope, and forcibly marrying her and non-consensually consummating the marriage (nonconsensual being a safe assumption given the Amazons were

maidens, who had sworn vows of chastity).^{xxxiii} From what remains of the surviving metopes, we see both Greeks and Amazons dying in battle, but it is another not-so-subtle reference to Greeks overpowering otherness. This mythological narrative is an example of the women's stories told through the male gaze, and helps modern viewers understand the reality of women's lives at the time. In the case of *Marble Statue of a Wounded Amazon*, we see the story of a woman made at the hands of a man, not told through her own voice, so how can we know what is true? What we can discern is that women were regarded as less than human, merely objects for male heroes, like Theseus, to take and use at their disposal for hubristic or propagandistic purposes.

Amazon presence in the Parthenon does not stop at the metopes. We see it repeated in the colossal statue of Pallas Athena that in its original context stood inside the Parthenon, known as the *Athena Parthenos* (Fig. 6). This statue served as a culmination of time, "embedded in Athenian consciousness," with the Gigantomachy and Amazonomachy repeated on her shield and the Centauromachy on her sandals.^{xxxiv} While the statue does not survive, we know a lot about its original appearance thanks to historical descriptions from the likes of Pausanias, Pliny the Elder, and Plutarch in addition to marble copies made on a much smaller scale.^{xxxv} Like the Parthenon as a whole, this statue served to symbolize Athenian realities through narratives of myth, emphasizing victory, democracy, and power through metaphorical stories of battles with outsiders.

Returning to our primary case study, *Marble Statue of a Wounded Amazon* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, there are a few things to be noted. Unlike the other examples of Amazons in classical Greek art that we have looked at, the medium of statuary in the round, due to engineering limitations, is primarily solitary. Vase painting allows for a multitude of figures, as does relief carving. But what makes this sculpture unique is that its individuality allows for a different narrative to be told, one that centered solely on the Amazon. Also, unlike the other pieces

in this discussion, it does not show her mid-fight but as a refugee, perhaps fleeing from the battle to seek safety. This isolated and quiet moment illustrated by the artist is intimate, vulnerable, and tragic. The continued trope of representing wounded Amazons was perhaps an attempt to display victory over them, but the tables are turned in the context of this statue. This statue represents the *idea* of women being on equal playing fields with men, being able to fight and defend themselves, but then demeans it by only exhibiting her in a state of defeat as opposed to action, emphasizing the submission and silencing of women. It is worth considering that perhaps a woman's display of vulnerability, as opposed to heroism, is even more valiant.

Amazonian depictions are often convoluted with opportunistic and idealized notions that matriarchal societies could exist without resistance. Amazons' frequent presence in ancient Greek literature, sculpture, temple decoration, and vase painting, as we have seen through multiple examples, proves otherwise. They are repeatedly portrayed in contexts of weakness and death. Perhaps images like *Marble Statue of a Wounded Amazon* or the vase painting of Achilles murdering Penthesilea are supposed be subtle reminders of the consequences that await minorities for usurping the unwritten status quos that made patriarchal autonomies like Greece thrive. The trope of wounded Amazons functioned as a tool for male Greek citizens to speak through, glorifying men to the detriment of women. It serves as a chilling reminder of the continued disparaging of independent women who are able to exist with no assistance from the patriarchy, a dynamic that even thousands of years later, has not changed. *Marble Statue of a Wounded Amazon* represents the consequences of otherness, as it shows the repercussions of allowing a center and a periphery, in this case, one that is defined by gender.

Images



Figure 1: *Marble Statue of a Wounded Amazon*, 1st-2nd century A.D (based on an original Greek Bronze sculpture, 5th century B.C.E), marble, 203.84 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 2: *Doryphoros* and *Marble Statue of a Wounded Amazon*

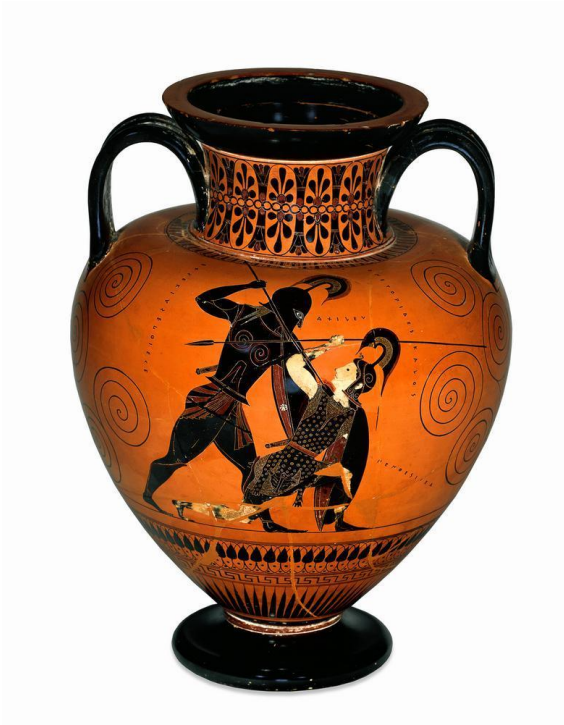


Figure 3: Attic black-figure amphora attributed to Exekios depicting the murder of Penthesilea by Achilles, 540-530 B.C.E., terracotta, 41 x 29 cm, British Museum, London.



Figure 4: Detail of wound from *Marble Statue of a Wounded Amazon*, 1st-2nd century A.D (based on an original Greek Bronze sculpture, 5th century B.C.E), marble, 203.84 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 5: Parthenon West Metope 1, 445-440 B.C.E., marble, 1.35 x 1.37 m, Acropolis Museum, Athens.

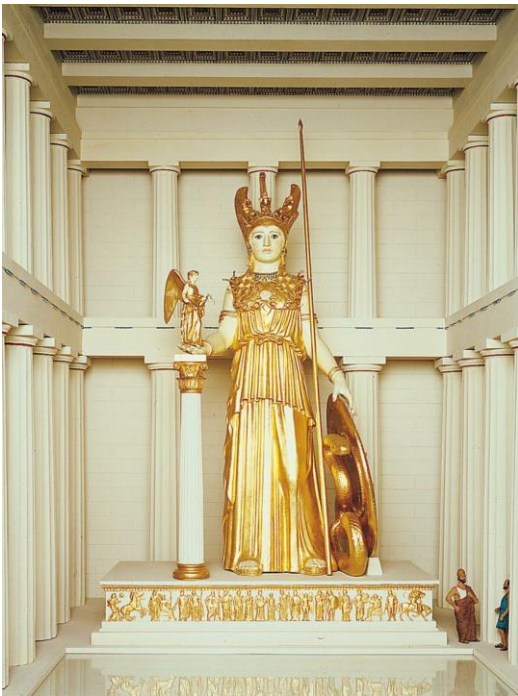


Figure 6: *Athena Parthenos*, Pheidias, chryselephantine, 447-438 B.C.E.

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- ^{xxxii} *Terracotta volute-krater (bowl for mixing wine and water)*, 450 B.C.E., terracotta; red-figure, 63.5 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- ^{xxxiii} Joan Breton Connelly, *The Parthenon Enigma: A New Understanding of the West’s Most Iconic Building and the People Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books [Division of Random House LLC], 2014), 102-103.
- ^{xxxiv} Connelly, *The Parthenon Enigma*, 278-279.
- ^{xxxv} Connelly, *The Parthenon Enigma*, 278-279.